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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000378

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI KING APPOINTS MODERATE TO CONTINUE REFORMS
OF RELIGIOUS POLICE

REF: RIYADH 356

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Classified By: Political Counselor Lisa M. Carle,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

KEY POINTS:

-- (U) King Abdullah's 14 February cabinet appointments included Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Humain Al-Humain as President of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, or mutawwain).

-- (U) Humain was previously a Counselor at the Royal Court. Before this he was a Shariah law judge but also active in charity and Quranic studies organizations.

-- (U) The King did not appoint a new president from within the CPVPV or the religious establishment. Rather, Humain is both inside the King's circle and palatable to religious conservatives.

-- (U) Fatal car chases, rough-handling of non-Muslim expatriates, and banishment of Western culture (either through intervention in Western cultural events or the outlawing of Valentines Day), have tarnished the image of the CPVPV for many Saudis - new leadership comes at a critical time.

-- (U) Contrary to reports being circulated, Humain's appointment did not change the official mandate or authorities of the CPVPV.

COMMENT: APPOINTMENT PART OF LARGER REFORMS

-- (C) The appointment of a new CPVPV president with both royal connections and Islamic legal qualifications is another manifestation of King Abdallah,s policy of gradual reform. Over the past several years, both King Abdullah and other SAG officials have acted to curb the CPVPV. Despite this, media and contacts continue to report instances in which CPVPV officials exceeded their authority. Humain's mandate will be to intensify efforts to rein in overzealous officials and bring the CPVPV in line with the King's new reforms.

-- (C) King Abdallah,s appointment of Humain is not meant to break the back of the CPVPV, but rather soften the lines between CPVPV practices and the King's political desire to improve Saudi Arabia's image and curb religious extremism.

END KEY POINTS & COMMENT.

BACKGROUND

¶1. (U) WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CPVPV? Saudi Founder King Abdalaziz established the CPVPV to uphold standards of public behavior based upon Shariah law. In Saudi Arabia, the CPVPV is commonly referred to as the "hayy,a," meaning commission. The CPVPV comprises approximately 3,500 officers in addition to thousands of volunteers. Most estimates put the total numbers of the CPVPV at 10,000. The CPVPV has the power to arrest unrelated males and females socializing (khulwa), anyone engaged in acts of homosexuality or prostitution; to enforce Islamic dress codes, as well as ensure store closures during prayer times. Additionally, the CPVPV enforces Muslim dietary prohibition such as the sale or consumption of alcohol and pork; seizes banned consumer and media products such as certain Western music or pornography; and prevents the proselytizing by non-Muslims.

¶2. (C) WHERE DOES THE PUBLIC STAND? Recently, media and contacts report increasingly public CPVPV operations - operations that are seen as more embarrassing for the CPVPV than they are productive in enforcing Shariah law. For example, CPVPV officials recently raided a British book fair in Riyadh, raided a folklore section of the Hail festival, and prevented people from entering a poetry reading at the Hail Literary Club. Contacts tell us that most Saudis want the CPVPV to be more accountable, and believe that CPVPV excesses such as illegal arrests, detentions, or excessive use of force are rarely disciplined. Saudi police do not handle complaints against the CPVPV, but rather refer individuals to the respective governor's office, which rarely produces results. A February 17 editorial in Arab News argued that "When the employees of the commission commit mistakes, the commission does not give us the feeling that it is serious about correcting the mistakes or holding the wrongdoers accountable. The commission sends the wrong message on two fronts: first to society, which sees the

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denial policy to mean that the commission is error free. The second message is equally harmful - denial by the commission leads to its employees believing that they cannot be held accountable for any wrongdoing." That said, most Saudis appear to support a role for the CPVPV in policing Saudi mores.

REFORMING THE CPVPV: NOT JUST A NEW HEAD

¶3. (C) THE GOVERNMENT'S RECENT REFORMS: In 2006, Interior Minister Prince Nayef, whose ministry oversees the CPVPV, stated that the CPVPV cannot detain or interrogate suspects or "violate the sanctity of private homes." Many interpret this to mean that the CPVPV cannot enter a home without a search warrant; however, there continue to be press reports of such searches. Additionally, in 2007, King Abdallah issued a royal decree clarifying that the CPVPV could not detain and interrogate suspects; only the Saudi police have the authority to make arrests. Again, many local media continue to report instances of CPVPV officers exceeding their authority by detaining individuals without contacting the police.

¶4. (C) THE CPVPV,S OWN REFORMS: While press and contacts consider Humain to be more moderate than his predecessor Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, there have been several reforms within the CPVPV over the last two years. Al-Ghaith announced in June, 2007 the creation of a "Department of Rules and Regulations," within the CPVPV to ensure the actions of the CPVPV comply with the law. In July 2007, in reaction to several civilian deaths caused by CPVPV officials engaging in car chases with suspects, Al-Ghaith declared that "It is sufficient to report the description of the person and the car's license plate number to security authorities and checkpoints," effectively barring CPVPV members from engaging in high speed pursuits. In addition, Al-Ghaith undertook several public outreach efforts during 2008 to improve the CPVPV's image, such as

having CPVPV members bowl with Saudi youth. Additionally, media and contacts report that Al-Ghaith created several training programs for CPVPV officers in recent years: English language programs, graduate degrees, and specialized courses on how to deal with foreign diplomats.

¶5. (C) THE PROBLEM OF VOLUNTEERS: Many of the instances in which the CPVPV will raid book fairs or cultural festivals are initiated by CPVPV "volunteers." There are several thousand official CPVPV volunteers who aid CPVPV officers, but there are increasing reports of unofficial volunteers acting without CPVPV permission. This has become such a problem that recently two members of the Council of Senior Ulema issued a fatwa stating that it is illegal to impersonate members of the CPVPV. Some contacts report that a key priority for Humain will be holding those posing as CPVPV officers accountable.

IN STEPS HUMAIN:

¶6. (U) BIOGRAPHY: Abdul Aziz Bin Humain Al-Humain was born in Zulfi (in the Nejd) on January 10, 1963. He graduated from Riyadh,s Shariah College in 1986. He was a judge at the General Court in Allaa district from 1991 to 1994, Chief of the General Court in Rass district (in Qassim) from 1994 to 2006, and the Counselor to the Royal Court from 2006 to ¶2009. He held five other part-time positions:

- Secretary General of Developmental Housing Committee in Qassim
- Member of the Senior Committee at the Office of Research and Studies
- Head of the Charitable Organization for Quran Studies in Rass
- Head of the Ber Charitable Organization in Rass
- Head of the Administrative Council of the Elderly Center in Rass

¶7. (U) HUMAIN,S PUBLIC STATEMENTS SINCE HIS APPOINTMENT: In a February 16 article, Al-Hayat quoted Humain as arguing that "Believing in the good of others is the principle of the Commission." He stated that the CPVPV must presume innocence before guilt. He also claimed that "The problems and concerns of citizens and expatriates are the same as those of all members of the Hayy,a." In his first public appearance following his appointment at CPVPV headquarters in Riyadh, Humain already reflected a change. He said that a person is innocent until proven guilty, reflecting sensitivity to widespread public attitude that the CPVPV acts without cause

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and due process.

¶8. (C) MEDIA AND CONTACT REACTION: An editorial in Saudi Gazette on February 16 argued that Humain is "believed to be fair-minded, practical and scholarly, and who will promote the teachings of Prophet Muhammad in a more enlightened manner (than previous CPVPV President Al-Ghaith)." Many contacts report that his appointment signifies King Abdallah,s desire to reign in the CPVPV; as his previous position in the Royal Court helped establish him as one of the King's men. In a February 17 Al-Arabbiya TV interview, when asked about his vision for the CPVPV, Humain responded, "We will seek to achieve the aspirations of the rulers (i.e., the King)."

¶9. (C) THE ROAD AHEAD: While Western media sources and westernized contacts criticize the CPVPV, its continued existence is not in doubt. Many Saudis are supportive of the CPVPV as an institution because they believe that upholds Shariah law. Humain comes to the job with both royal experience and connections, and hence must carry out the king's initiatives. He is inheriting a commission that is facing much public criticism; he will need to improve the

CPVPV's image through public outreach, reign-in unofficial volunteers, and improve accountability and transparency.
FRAKER